



WHY PREACH THE LAW?

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Lutherans are not generally distinguished within the church catholic on account of impassioned preaching on the law of God. Our specialty is the gospel, the unmerited mercy of God given freely in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, awakening faith and creating new life. This news is so astonishing and so beyond the reach of the ordinary religious imagination that we can't say enough about it. And rightly so.

And yet. There is no human life without law. There is no community without law. Ultimately, there is no church and indeed no kingdom of God without law. When our hearts are in order, the law no longer accuses; it instead directs and shapes our mutual life of love with God and neighbor; but it's definitely still there, playing its part. And in the meanwhile, as long as our hearts are most certainly *not* in order, we need the law to restrain the worst of our sins, pop the bubble of our self-righteousness, and show how to coexist in the best simulacrum of heavenly righteousness we can manage. "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" (Psalm 133:1). One need not be a hellfire-and-brimstone preacher to agree with that.

Still, gospel-loving Lutheran preachers might benefit from some encouragement to preach on the law—some assurance that in so doing they are not betraying their ordination vows. Here are some reasons to sin boldly, so to speak, in preaching on the law of God.¹

For starters, the Ten Commandments are the first and longest part of the Catechisms. If we were to assume that the Catechisms are arranged in a progressive pattern, we might conclude that the Commandments start things off only because they are swiftly to be left behind. It does seem that many Lutherans approach them this way: they

are purely Second Use of the Law in their application, and the sooner we have achieved sufficient guilt before Christ to toss them aside, the better.

This is a misreading of Luther's intent. He proposed a First and Second Use of the Law but also taught that the Commandments should shape the present Christian life lived in faith toward God and love toward the neighbor. He made no bones about it: "Apart from these Ten Commandments no action or life can be good or pleasing to God..."² Of course, faith is necessary. But faith does not render the keeping of the Commandments *unnecessary*.

Nor does faith render the meaning of the law facilely clear. It's no accident that Luther appends such detailed explanations to the Commandments, because even insofar as we are renewed we do not instantly deduce all the implications of the Christian life. In the Large Catechism, the Commandments section is twice as long as the Creed section and three times as long as the Lord's Prayer section. Luther even notes that the Creed is what makes it possible for us to obey the Commandments and that Lord's Prayer is the way to keep the Second Commandment!

Luther's strategy is to take the Old Testament template of the Commandments and embroider its meaning with Jesus' and the apostles' teaching in the New Testament. So, for instance, it's not enough not to kill one's neighbors, as Moses taught, but we must also help and support them in all of life's needs—calling to mind the Sermon on the Mount and the parable of the Good Samaritan, which themselves refer back to the expansive commentary on the law that is found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. There is a profound unity in God's witness to Israel and the church regarding His desire for human life.

This brings us to another reason to preach the law: to

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continue in some small way the process of undoing two thousand years of prejudice against the Jews and their Torah. The early church had its own version of this prejudice, in which it replaced all the Old Testament “sacraments” like circumcision and Passover with its own new, improved, Gentile-friendly sacraments like baptism and communion, and replaced Jewish dietary laws with canon laws about fasting and feasting. In addition to being wrongly supercessionist, this helped construct a pernicious ethnic prejudice against Jews that, much later, Lutherans and other Protestants turned into a bifurcation of Judaism as the religion of law and Christianity as the religion of gospel, or freedom, or love, or whatever was seen to be better than Jewish law.

It is true that one of the first discoveries of the newborn church was that the ritual law of the Jews was not to be imposed on Gentile converts, and that even Jewish believers in Jesus were no longer bound by laws about food or contact with Gentiles. As Christians we have, at most, the provisional canon law of the church rather than the ritual religious law of Israel. But that is a far cry from law religion vs. love religion. Jewish law served to make Israel a unique witness among the nations, to frame their lives so as always to be oriented to the one true God and not get sucked into idol worship. Love was built into a great many of the laws, and there is certainly no freedom where idolatry abounds. Jesus was correcting misinterpretations of Israel’s law, not dispensing with it altogether: “not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18). It wasn’t a matter of eliminating a fundamentally corrupt Sabbath but recasting its meaning. How rarely we remember that.

The fact is, even though we are all very clear now that we are not to be anti-Semitic and not to inter Jews in concentration camps or kill them, we still regularly scorn their law as if it weren’t part of our canon of holy

Scripture, too. Every single time I have heard a sermon on the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8, it’s always been about how eunuchs were excluded by the you-know-whos from serving in the temple and only with the gospel was that silly law done away with and the eunuchs allowed in. (Actually, Isaiah had already let them in.) Same thing with the hemorrhaging woman: those nasty purity laws had pushed her to the margins of society, and only enlightened Jesus welcomed her back. How often we hear that homosexual activity may have been excluded by the Jewish law, but then *those* people advocated stoning adulterers, too, so forget about them! The preaching of a tolerant, lawless Christian ethic ends up sounding remarkably like intolerance to the first and larger half of our

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Bible, and probably in time will lead to contempt for the people who wrote and still keep it.

If anything, we ought to take a leaf out of their book—in this case, the Talmud—in recognizing that understanding the law of God is no simple matter. It takes a lifetime, it takes *generations* to comprehend the law. The law is rich, profound, surprising, inspiring, intimidating, and inexhaustible. Who knows well enough how to love God and neighbor? Who has accurately fathomed the depths of her own heart or the sickness of her civilization? We often spew immediate solutions to the world’s problems without serious time meditating on what the Scripture has to say about God’s law for our lives

together. It is not only the adoption of assorted laws; it’s even more so a matter of acquiring the same vision and imagination as the Scripture. How else can we teach about abortion, when it is never mentioned even once in the Bible? How do we teach about sexual assault when it is addressed not through laws but through grisly horror stories? How do we think about wealth and poverty in a vastly different economy?³

Typically, as Christians, we say that the law is love, following Matthew 22:40 and Galatians 5:14—but we simplistically assume that we already know what love is. The law’s purpose is to teach us what love actually looks like in practice. The law is training in the skills of loving well. Think of the classic stereotypes of the overbearing mother, the couple who make each other miserable, the father who beats his child for “its own good”: all claim to be acting in love, perhaps all even feel something like love; nevertheless, their actions are not in keeping with love. It’s pretty hard to argue with people that “what you’re doing isn’t love” if they insist that it is; but it’s not hard to show that an action is not in obedience to the law. That is why the Old Testament is so full of praise and relief at actually knowing the content of the divine law. Life goes so much better when you have directions for it.

This certainly does not mean any vacuous preaching about how “God has a wonderful plan for your life,” unless by “wonderful” you mean “cruciform.” But the most urgent reason to preach the law of God is because there are so many other laws out there getting preached *all the time*. Far too many of our people still operate under the illusion that American culture is preaching the law of God and people will just absorb it without any particular instruction. (One sees this especially in parents astonished at the choices their adult children have made.) Many think the culture proclaims God’s law so effectively that folks are oppressed by it and our job is to liberate them from it. That may apply to certain

fundamentalist wings of American Evangelicalism, but unless your primary mission field is other Christian churches,⁴ you have a different problem on your hands. The law that most everyone else is obeying most of the time may not be inscribed on a pair of tablets, but it relentlessly demands obedient conformity in the way of looks, wealth, speech, commitments, sexuality, size, patriotism, respectability, safety and security. There is no longer any reason to assume that our people or North Americans generally have the slightest idea what the good life is, from the divine perspective, or how to get there.

The Commandments, however, speak as powerfully and prophetically today as they ever did about the besetting problems in our society. The Seventh and Ninth challenge our materialist, consumerist culture; the Fourth, Sixth, and Tenth speak to family and sexuality; the Fifth confronts all forms of violence; even the growing specter of speech monitoring, whether by political correctness or eavesdropping government agencies, finds a counterpoint in Christians' own guidelines for speech in the Eighth Commandment. God's law is better than any other law on offer—not only for its breadth and nuance and complexity, but also because it includes a command to forgive. And that is something no other law can tolerate.

At least, not real forgiveness. A cheapened, secularized version of forgiveness has become popular and even mandatory. Pop culture, from TV to music to therapeutic advice columns, loves to depict people betraying and devastating each other, but it all turns out OK in the end as long as a no-cost apology gets uttered. Sometimes you get the idea that the only real crime is to refuse to let it go after the platitudinous apology, and the only real failure is not to be infinitely resilient no matter how badly others damage you. In short, this is how social Darwinism lives on among us: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Translate

that into emotional terms, and you see how warped this so-called forgiveness has become.

Properly understood—that is, in Christian perspective—the forgiveness of sins is a terrifying prospect, not a cheap cure for any amount of bad behavior. In the church it is so much the air we breathe that we tend to take it for granted, losing our sense of its danger. We issue absolution without the whole narrative train it arrives on: namely, that this absolution was made possible only by the *death* of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, on a cross. And the cross had to come

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because the law of God is *so good*, so necessary for the flourishing of life, that any breach is of cosmic consequence. Paul alludes to this terrible mystery in Romans 3:25, suggesting that God's previous forbearance vis-à-vis sin was so morally doubtful, and so undermined His claim to be good, that the blood of His Son was needed to prove His righteousness.

To us forgiveness is commanded, as we acknowledge every time we recite the Lord's Prayer. But it is not something to do lightly. To forgive is to recognize a rupture in the fabric of creation; it is to join in the Golgathic cost of making it right again. The hurts are not dealt out to make us "stronger" (read: better able to hurt others next time before they can hurt us) but are attacks on the good that God has made. It takes the gigantic hurt of the cross, "the pain of God" as Japanese Lutheran theologian Kazoh Kitamori put it, to set things right again.⁵ The vast mercy of the cross remains veiled

to us until we know the good that is God's law.

But how to do it? It's one thing to say we should preach the law, it's another thing actually to do it, and do it well. All too often a law sermon inadvertently reassures the complacent that they're in good form.⁶ (I suppose it also still terrorizes the scrupulous, though I must confess I've seen a lot less of that.) There are other ways to mess up the law sermon, too. One is by being so intoxicated with the complexity of the issues that nothing of substance is ever said, and everyone goes away affirmed to do whatever they were going to do anyway, quite apart from anything God has to say about it. Another mistake is being so eager to make the law's point that the sermon turns into a new and improved checklist for righteousness. Yet another is the political sermon that masquerades as a moral one, assuming an obvious translation of divine principle into public policy. This ignores both the insight of pagans into the law (Romans 1:19, 13:3–7) and the ambiguity of all Christian efforts, however scripturally well informed (1 John 1:8).

One way to approach the law's preaching is to prepare the ground with liturgical practices. It is not unknown among Lutheran pastors to have the congregation read aloud the Ten Commandments during Lent. (Note that the Creed and Lord's Prayer are part of every Sunday worship, but not the Commandments. Why not?) Some include Luther's explanations as part of the recitation as well, to avoid the "Well I didn't kill anyone so I guess I'm in the clear" phenomenon. This one season of the church year is a good start, but it's still not very much. Other occasions might lend themselves well to the practice, such as Reformation or Trinity Sunday (unless your people are already overwhelmed by the Athanasian Creed), or simply as a once-a-month habit.

Another liturgical matter to consider is the corporate confession.

Too often the main thing we're confessing is that we haven't been "good enough Christians." It's assumed that none of us are adulterers, coveters, murderers or even harmers, and that our main failures are a spot of self-righteousness here and a missed opportunity to invite a friend to church there. In other words, we're all Pharisees, but none of us are publicans. That might be the reality in some congregations, but probably most of them could boast some pretty egregious sins if the truth were known. As a thought experiment, imagine how your liturgy's confession would sound to a serious sinner wandering into church in search of some message. Would there be a challenge to his evildoing that he could hear? Or would he want to leave immediately, for fear that everybody in the church was way too good for the likes of him? Better to allot sin its full scope and opt for a bigger confession of bigger sins.

On the other side of the confession, it is well to reflect on the type of absolution that is granted. We have the option for both a performative announcement of pardon and a conditional one, the former of which seems to be more popular. It's worth recalling, in this regard, that Luther's earliest controversies over confession were due to his insistence that Matthew 16:19 was really, literally true—"whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven"—because the promise of Christ is more reliable than anything else on heaven and earth. Therefore, O pastors, reflect well whether it is really wise to loose unconditionally everyone who shows up on a Sunday before you have heard their sins or exhorted them to repentance!

Once that's all been done, what about the preaching itself? As has already been emphasized, take the expansive path. Stretch broadly across the canon of Scripture. Take the time to read outside the lectionary and

find out what the law has to say that has previously escaped your notice or even challenges some of your dearly-held convictions. God's law is illustrated not only in precepts, important as they are, but also in stories, songs, and sermons, in furious diatribes and heavenly visions. The biblical writers used all kinds of tactics to get their point across, and you can do the same. Don't choose between person and community: personal patterns of sin and disobedience need to be confronted, social patterns of sin and disobedience need to be confronted, and Christians need to be equipped to tackle both. Teach prayer. Teach Christ the law-giver alongside Christ the savior.

We need God's law if we will not end up blindly obedient to another master and its terrible law. This little-known and rather peculiar parable of Jesus' speaks well to the situation we find ourselves in:

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, "I will return to my house from which I came." And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation. (Matthew 12:43-45)

Legalism is not something we should tolerate or protect; it is indeed a demon. But something better of the legal genre had better take up residence its place—a wholistic, generous, thoughtful, multi-generational reflection on the law of God, as delivered by Moses on the mountain and refined by the prophets, the savior, and the apostles—or else a whole host of other evils will come in to fill the void.

As Luther complains in his preface to the Large Catechism: "Oh, what mad, senseless fools we are! We must ever live and dwell in the midst of such mighty enemies like the devils, and yet would despise our weapons and armor, too lazy to examine them or give them a thought!"⁷ LF

Notes

1. Thanks are due to Robert Myallis, who convened two sessions on Skype this past January between me and about twenty other pastors interested in discussing the law in Lutheran theology. It was an extremely fruitful discussion, and I thank all the pastors involved for their reflections both on the meaning of the law and how to convey it effectively in our culture and congregations.

2. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [hereafter cited as BC], 428.

3. Already a classic, I find Richard B. Hays's *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: HarperOne, 1996) to be an excellent guide to acquiring the biblical imagination. His case studies of difficult issues are particularly helpful.

4. One gets the distinct impression that this is the only use the ELCA can think of for its remnant of Lutheran theology. For instance, at its website dedicated to the 2017 jubilee, it answers the question "Why is the Reformation still relevant?" with: "Many in Christian communities today are burdened, sometimes even tormented, by preaching and teaching that compromises the promise of mercy freely given in Christ with no condition of human qualification, preparation or response...", as well as other remarks about "Christian communities" that get it wrong. See <www.elca500.org/the-observance/#question2>, accessed April 15, 2015.

5. Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God: The First Original Theology from Japan* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005).

6. Which is why, in Luther's thinking, the Commandments end with coveting: "This last commandment, therefore, is not addressed to those whom the world considers wicked rogues, but precisely to the most upright—to people who wish to be commended as honest and virtuous because they have not offended against the preceding commandments." BC 426.

7. BC 382.